



# Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy

## A Story of Success and Controversies

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\*I gratefully acknowledge the monumental historical work of Mr. Emanuele Pace, from where come most pictures of the first part

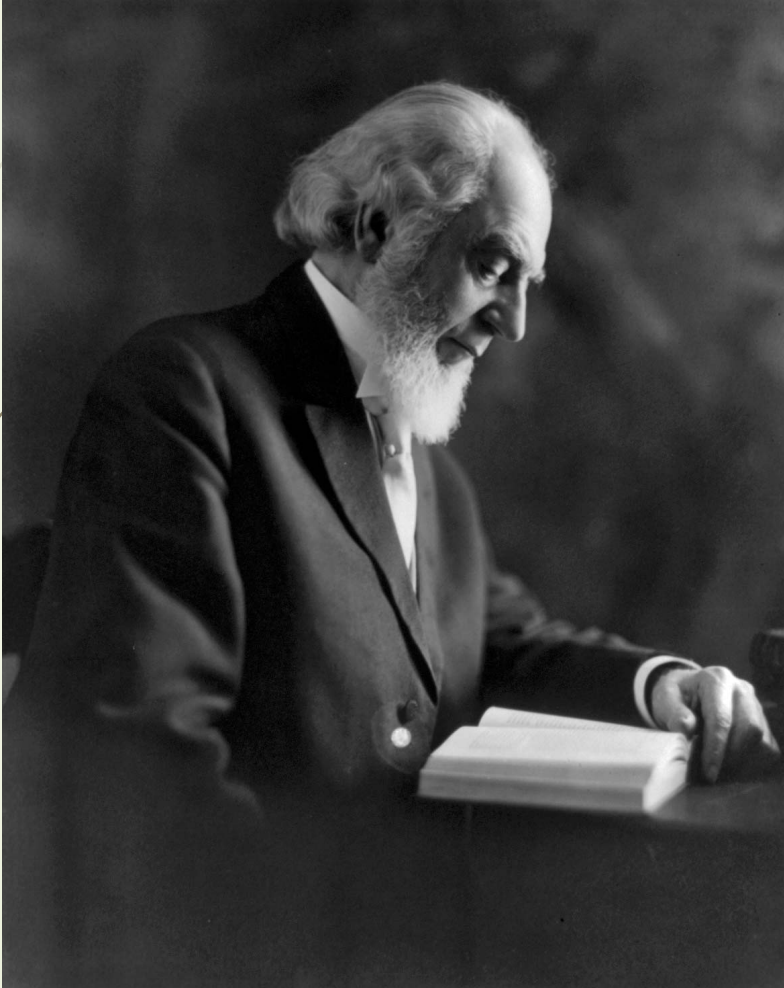


# A Success Story



- In 2015, Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy had 2,998 congregations, 1,370 Kingdom's Halls, 250,277 average publishers preaching each month, and those attending the yearly memorial were 435,046. Italy remains one of the most spectacular success stories of Jehovah's Witnesses internationally

# Russell's First Visit to Italy



- Initially, Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916, left) did not foresee that success. He visited Italy in 1891, and reported that the country was so deeply controlled by the Catholic Church that a mission there was almost impossible
- In June 1903, however, Russell visited Europe for the second time and led a conference in Zurich, Switzerland, with two Italians among the 170 participants. Who were they?



# The Waldensian Connection

- We do not know for sure, but they were most probably members of the Waldensian Church, who had not joined the Bible Students but were interested in Russell's ideas
- The Waldensian Church originates from a reformist group founded by a Catholic merchant of Lyon called Waldo (ca. 1140-1205: the name «Peter Waldo» comes from later legends and he was never called Peter during his lifetime)



19<sup>th</sup>-century statue of Waldo, Worms, Germany

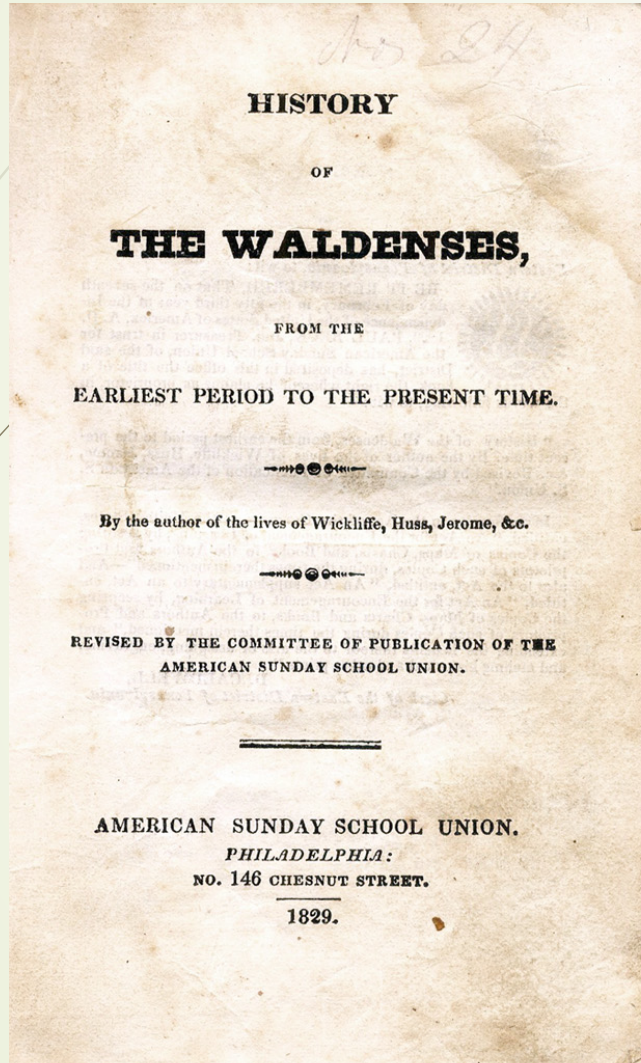


# Waldensians and the Reformation



- Waldo was excommunicated in 1184 for his radical ideas about poverty and the laypersons' role in the Church. Persecuted in France, Waldensians moved to the valleys of Piedmont, and in 1532 at the Synod of Chanforan joined the Calvinist Reformation

# The Waldensian Myth ...



- Several 19<sup>th</sup>-century new religious movements, including the Seventh-day Adventists and the Mormons, read about the Waldensians and believed that these brave «oldest Protestants» were ready to convert to their new truth
- When they sent missionaries to the Waldensian valleys, however, they discovered that real-life Waldensians were part of an isolated people very much attached to its traditions. Conversions were rare



## ... and Reality

- It was true, however, that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Waldensian Church was experiencing an intellectual revival. Some Waldensians were interested in reading and even translating into Italian Pastor Russell's writings. Through Waldensians Daniele Rivoire (1858-1911) and, later, Pastor Giuseppe Banchetti (1866-1926), an Italian edition of the *Zion's Watch Tower* started being published in 1903 as *La Vedetta di Sion e l'Araldo della Presenza di Cristo*





# Waldensians and Witnesses

**L'ÉCHO DES VALLEES**  
 Paraissant chaque Vendredi  
 Spéc. Vallées Valdes TORRE PELLICE

PREMIER	Par an	Par 6 mois
Vallées Valdaises	L. 8.-	5.-
Italie (au dehors des Vallées) et Colonies	" 10.-	6.-
Etranger	" 20.-	12.-
Payements adressés à la même adresse	" 10.-	" 6.-
Cartes-lettres d'Amérique	" 10.-	" 6.-

Do s'abonner à Torre Pellice, au Bureau d'Administration de l'Écho (Via Arnaud, 31); dans toutes les paroisses, chez M.M. les Pasteurs.

**L'ABONNEMENT SE PAYE D'AVANCE.**  
 S'adresser: pour la Rédaction, au Directeur M. Jean Colonna, professeur, Torre Pellice — pour l'Administration, au Bureau du Journal, Via Arnaud, N° 31 - Torre Pellice.  
 Pour toutes les annonces s'adresser au Bureau du Journal.  
 Tout changement d'adresse coûte 50 centimes, sauf ceux du commencement de l'année.  
 Le Numéro: 25 centimes

Que toutes les choses vraies, honnêtes, justes, pures, aimables..., dignes de louange, occupent vos pensées (Phil. IV, 8).

## Opuscoli

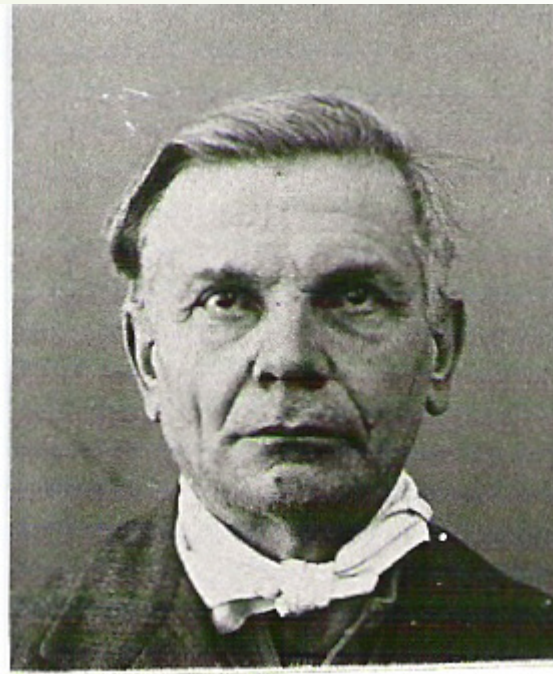
UGO JANNI. Il Dogma dell'Eucarestia e la Ragione cristiana. Roma, Casa Editrice « La Speranza », 1904. (214 p. 8°). Prezzo: L. 1,25.

Una guida per coloro che studiano la Bibbia. Il Divino Piano delle Età. Tradotto dall'inglese. Pinerolo, Tipografia Sociale, 1904 (400 p.) Prezzo: L. 1,50. — Legato. 2,50.

- Rivoire completed in 1904 an Italian translation of Russell's *Plan of the Ages*. It was advertised in the local press of the Waldensian Valleys (left), but most of the copies were shipped to Pastor Russell for distribution among Italian Americans. Rivoire and Banchetti remained Waldensians and never became Bible Students



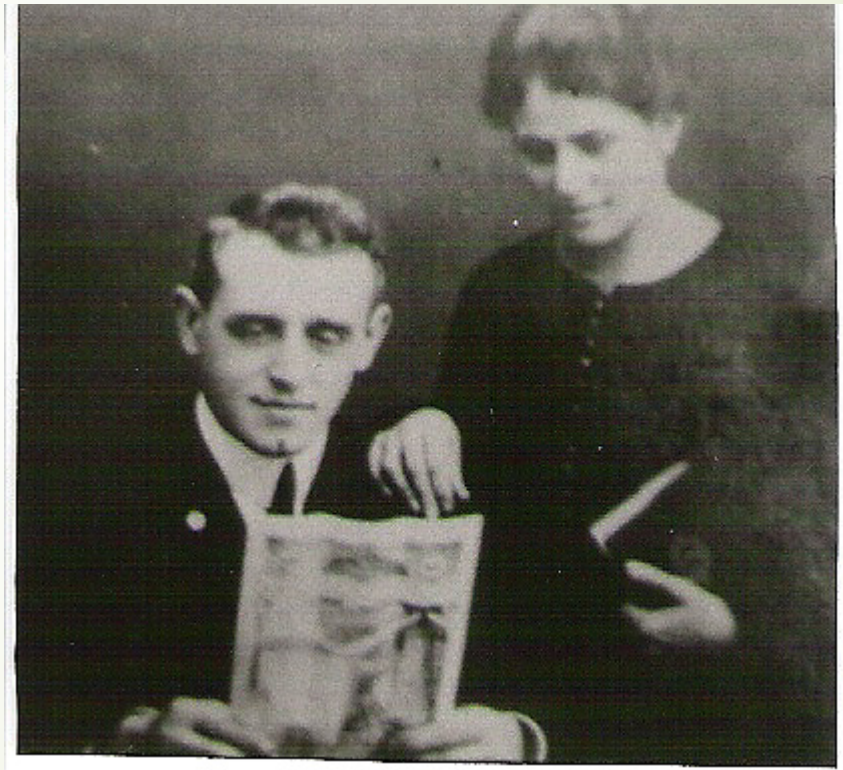
# Waldensian Converts



- Eventually, however, a handful of Waldensians from the Valleys converted, including Giosuè Vittorio Paschetto (1889-1956, left)

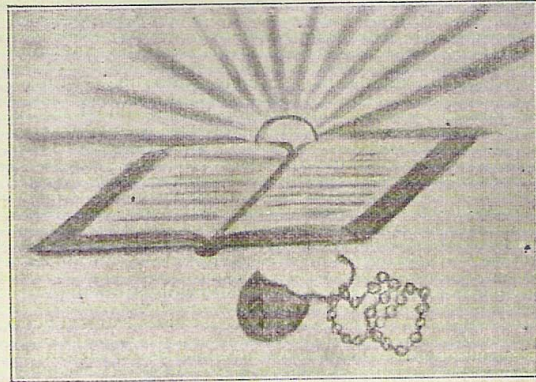
# The First Congregation

- The first congregation was inaugurated in Pinerolo in 1908 and included Catholics living in the Waldensian Valleys who had in turn converted, such as Remigio Cuminetti (1890-1939: right, with his wife). He later became the first Italian leader of the Bible Students





# *The Triumph of the Bible*



## IL TRIONFO DELLA BIBBIA

- In 1910, Russell preached in Italy for his first and last time at the YMCA in Rome to some twenty Protestants: none converted.
- The activity remained concentrated in Piedmont, where the Bible Students published in 1915 an original – and perhaps not entirely orthodox – booklet called *The Triumph of the Bible*

# World War I

- With World War I, legal troubles started. Bible Students were attacked for their anti-war position and Cuminetti, as a conscientious objector, was sentenced to three and a half years in jail (decision of August 18, 1916, right)

N. 10419 del Reg. Processi N. 309 d'ordine  
Data 18 Agosto 1916

IN NOME DI S. M. VITTORIO EMANUELE III<sup>o</sup>  
PER GRAZIA DI DIO E VOLONTÀ DELLA NAZIONE  
RE D'ITALIA

Il Tribunale Militare Territoriale di Alessandria  
COMPOSTO DEI SIGNORI

Vivaldi Cav. Antonio	Enante Colonnello	Presidente
Lugano Cav. Francesco	Maggiore	: Giudice
Gallina Cav. Dionigi	" "	" "
Bollio Cav. Carlo	" "	" "
Manardi Cav. Giuseppe	" "	" "
Clavari Cav. Paolo	Capitano	" "
Bozzola Cav. Antonio	Segretario estensore	

HA PRONUNCIATO LA SEGUENTE  
**SENTENZA**  
NELLA CAUSA CONTRO

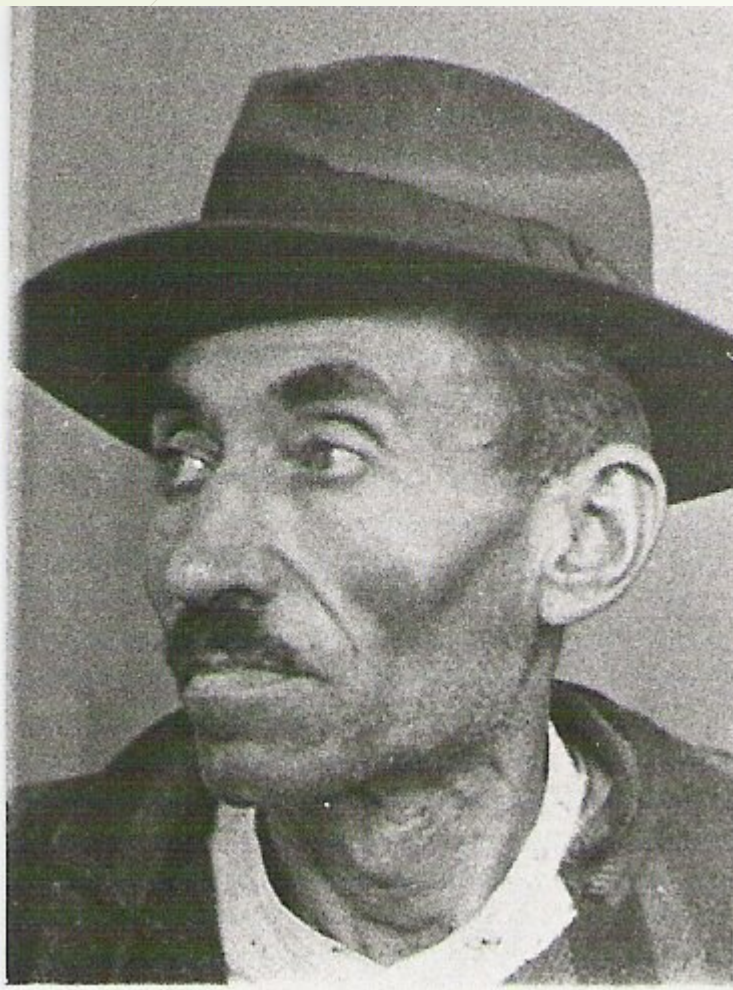
Cuminetti Remigio di Lazzaro nato il 11<sup>o</sup> luglio 1890 a Pinerola (Torino), collaudatore meccanico, alfabeto incensurato, soldato nel 33<sup>o</sup> Regg. fanteria. Adenuto dal 31-5-1916. Imputato di:  
Rifruto d'obbedienza in tempo di guerra a sensi degli art. 112, 113 C.F. e 29 d. 3108/1915 fatti in Cuneo e nel magazzino del 33<sup>o</sup> Regg. fanteria avendo il 25 maggio 1916.

Con l'adunata del 2/8/16  
la pena è ridotta a 3 anni  
e 6 mesi di reclusione  
con l'assoluzione  
IL SEGRETARIO  
18/8/16

24<sup>o</sup> 19 agosto 1916. Cuminetti ha di chiarito  
si voler ricoverare in millite al Tribunale Supremo  
di Cuneo e daranno contro la presente sentenza  
di Cuminetti  
10-11-9/19  
fornit

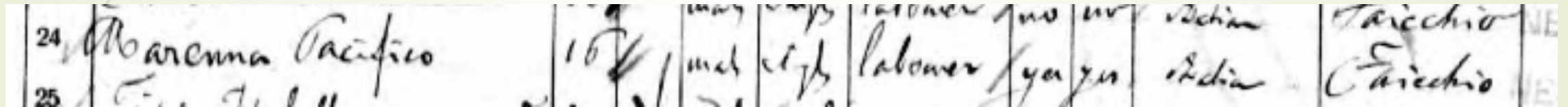


# Returned Migrants



- After World War I, Bible Students – later to be named Jehovah's Witnesses – acquired their first Italian members outside Piedmont. They were Italian Americans who had converted in the United States and returned to their native villages, where they started congregations. One leading such figure was Marcello Martinelli (1881-1960, left) who returned in 1919 from Hartford, Connecticut, to Castione Andevenno, north of Milan

# The First Non-Waldensian Convert



- However, the first non-Waldensian Bible Student active in Italy (even before Cuminetti) may well have been Pacifico Maremma (1883-1971), who emigrated from Faicchio (province of Benevento, near Naples: see immigration record) to New York in 1899, converted there, and returned to Faicchio in 1904





# Congregations in the South

- Returned migrants also created the first congregations in Central and Southern Italy. They included Vincenzo Pizzoferrato (1881-1949, above) who returned from Hartford to Pratola Peligna, in the Southern region of Abruzzi; Michele Cavalluzzo (1880-1946, below), who returned from Buffalo to Pietrelcina, the Southern town famous as birthplace of the Catholic saint Padre Pio (1887-1968); and Pietro Benincasa (1881-1961), who had converted in Chicago and returned to his Sicilian village of Alimena, near Palermo

# A National Movement

- In the early 1920s, the movement had between 50 and 100 members in nine different Italian regions: almost all those in the North, and Marche, Abruzzo, Campania and Sicily. The first Italian version of *The Watch Tower*, *La Vedetta di Sion*, lasted only from 1903 to 1909. From 1917 on, a new version called *La Torre di Vedetta* was published in the U.S., and circulated also in Italy





# Italian Branch

## AVVISO AI FRATELLI IN ITALIA

Un ramo della Società è stato ora aperto a Pinerolo, Prov. Torino, Italia, il rappresentante del quale, è: REMIGIO CUMINETTI, con altri fratelli che assisteranno a facilitare il lavoro all'Estero.

In detto ramo vi saranno depositi di libri e trattati della Società, per venderli e mandarli ai fratelli residenti in Italia e circo vicino.

Tutti i fratelli ed amici che resiedono all'Estero, potranno ottenere libri e tratti direttamente da quell'ufficio, senza scrivere a noi qui in America. Potranno

quindi, mandare lì, gli ordini, con l'importo, tanto per i libri come pure per l'abbonamento della TORRE DI GUARDIA. Indirizzante le lettere a nome della Società, nel seguente modo ed al seguente indirizzo:

TORRE DI GUARDIA  
SOCIETÀ BIBBIE E TRATTATI

VIA SILVIO PELLICO 11  
PINEROLO, PROV. TORINO, ITALIA.

- In 1923, Cuminetti and Martinelli toured the Italian congregations. The Italian field looked promising, and Swiss missionaries were sent to help. In 1923, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society opened an Italian office in Cuminetti's home in the Waldensian Valleys. In 1924, the *Watch Tower* announced the official opening of the Italian branch, with Cuminetti as national representative

# UN GOVERNO DESIDERABILE

Vita perpetua sulla terra.

Il mondo in perplessità.

La Lega delle Nazioni divinamente  
predetta. La sua fine.

L'umanità  
turbam

## The Fascist Regime

- From 1922, however, Italy was under the Fascist regime. Italian translations of booklets by Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869-1942) criticizing all human governments (above) determined the reaction of the Fascist police. Eventually, it arrested some local leaders, including Caterina Di Marco (1895-1982, below), a migrant returned from Philadelphia to the Abruzzi





# The First Assembly (1925)



- The Fascist repression led to the demise of some congregations. A report from 1925 lists 60 attending the memorial in six congregations, but probably a number of congregations were missing. Notwithstanding the problems, on April 23-26 the Italian branch celebrated in Pinerolo its first assembly, with a visitor from Brooklyn, the Canadian Alexander Hugh Macmillan (1877-1966), and with Cuminetti marrying one of the Swiss missionaries during the first day of the assembly

➤ In September 1925, the regime reacted to the assembly by arresting the first Bible Students, including Martinelli. The office in Pinerolo was closed and a second one, opened in Milan in 1932, was also closed by the police after a few months. The police also kept track of most Italian Bible Students (see record for Luigi D'Angelo, 1897-1936, right, a very active returned migrant and leader in Spoltore, near Pescara )

Modello N. 10

# D'ANGELO

Luigi di Volutano

MINISTERO DELL'INTERNO

DIREZIONE GENERALE DELLA PUBBLICA SICUREZZA

## Casellario Politico Centrale

Anno	Mese	Giorno	Numero	Anno	Mese	Giorno	Numero
55	4	10	28532				
		26	61222				
	10	13	63554				
56	1	30	3156				
	2	7	31964				
	7	15	46164				
	7	16	59037				

**QUALIFICHE  
ED ALTRE INDICAZIONI**

Antifascista

Diffidato Politico

Ammonito Politico

Confinato politico *prosciolto*

MORTO

1956

**Diramata Circolare Ricerche**

N. \_\_\_\_\_ il \_\_\_\_\_

**Diramata Fotografia**

N. \_\_\_\_\_ il \_\_\_\_\_

**Autografo - sì - no**

**Pseudonimi**

altri nominativi e richiami ad altre pratiche

J



Mod. A. Standard - Roma

72



# Persecution



- In 1934, Jehovah's Witnesses' literature was banned in Italy. In total, 83 Witnesses were committed to trial and sent to jail, or interned without process, in Italy, between 1925 and 1944. Almost all Witnesses were personally persecuted, including women: Maria Maddalena Pizzato (1897-1986, left) was sentenced to 11 years in jail
- Some Catholic priests played a role in denouncing the Witnesses to the police, and those sentenced were rehabilitated only in the late 1950s

# Schisms

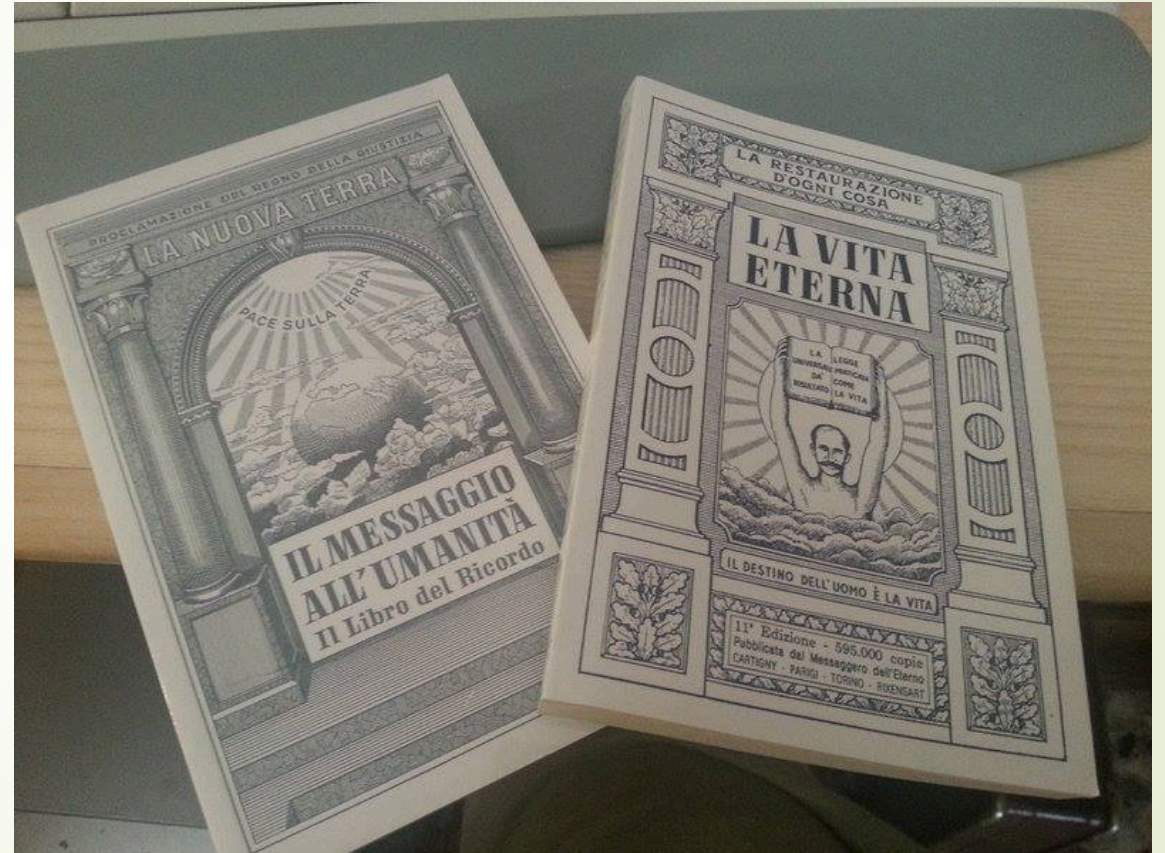
	<b>CHIESA CRISTIANA MILLENARISTA</b>	<b>MORE DIO I ITA</b>
<a href="mailto:chiesamillenarista@yahoo.it">chiesamillenarista@yahoo.it</a>		
<b>HOME PAGE</b>  <b>CHI SIAMO</b>  <b>LA DOTTRINA</b>  <b>PUBBLICAZIONI</b>  <b>INDIRIZZI</b>  <b>LA NUOVA</b>    <b>CREAZIONE</b>	<b>UN MESSAGGIO DI GIOIA</b>  V'è un messaggio che non ha perduto la sua validità attraverso i secoli: il messaggio di Gesù e degli Apostoli, degli Angeli e dei Profeti, della Chiesa primitiva e di quella di ogni tempo; un messaggio che dovrebbe essere predicato da ogni pulpito e divulgato da ogni cattedra; in ogni nazione ed in ogni lingua; in ogni città, villaggio o borgata; in ogni ufficio, cantiere, fabbrica, scuola, casa; alle persone di ogni sesso ed età, di ogni condizione sociale, di ogni partito o religione. È il messaggio di cui il mondo ha veramente bisogno e che, per il suo contenuto eccezionale, simile ad un potente squillo di tromba, deve echeggiare in tutta la terra, raggiungere tutti gli abitanti di essa, ridestarli, prepararli al più grande evento della storia umana di tutti i tempi, dopo quello della redenzione:  <b><u>IL RITORNO DI CRISTO!</u></b>	

- Quite apart from Fascist persecution, another problem for Italian Witnesses was the anti-Rutherford reaction in the United States and Switzerland, from where schisms were imported into Italy. One of the largest anti-Rutherford schisms developed in 1928 among Italian Americans Witnesses in Hartford (Connecticut) with Gaetano Boccaccio (1906-1996) as the Christian Millennial Fellowship, and acquired followers in Italy. It keeps some 100 Italian members with national headquarters in Pescara



# The Church of the Kingdom of God

- More successful in Italy was the Church of the Kingdom of God, or Philanthropic Assembly of the Friends of Man, founded by the former Swiss leader of the Bible Students, Alexander Freytag (1870-1947), who criticized both Rutherford and some of Russell's ideas. Sebastiano Chiardola (1914-1993) founded in 1946 in Turin the Italian branch, which keeps 18 congregations and around one thousand active followers



# A «Russellite» Network



- Another group loyal to Russell and rejecting Rutherford's innovations, the Dawn Bible Students Associations founded by W. Norman Woodworth (1891-1976), sent missions to Italy and organized some twenty groups in the 1950s and 1960s. Some went back to the Jehovah's Witness or joined Pentecostal churches. The Dawn Bible Students still exist in Italy, however, and are part of a larger network of independent «Russellite» groups. Sergio Gabrielli (1939-2006) was an important leader of this network and reprinted some of Russell's works (left)





## JWs after the War: A Phenomenal Growth

Year	Average Publishers	Memorial Attendance
1946	95	[missing]
1956	3,243	5,790
1966	9,798	19,682
1976	57,255	130,348
1986	134,677	301,009
1996	216,231	391,407

# Why the Growth?



- These figures call for an explanation. Opponents insist that success depends from door to door techniques, with theories ranging from aggressive salesmanship to brainwashing. Social scientists, however, know that there is nothing magic in the Witnesses' door to door system and that most conversions come through the usual social networks of friends and acquaintances. And why should these techniques be more successful in Italy than elsewhere?



# 1. Lack of Competition

- A better explanation is that, because of the Catholic Church's opposition to the political unification of Italy, decades of anti-Catholic propaganda (right), and the perception of the Church by the working classes as part of the establishment – all feelings also fueled after World War II by the narrative proposed by the Italian Communist Party, the largest such party in the West –, there was a pool of potential converts to a religion other than Catholicism
- And limited competition: the Mormons reopened their Italian missions only in 1966; Pentecostals also took advantage of returned migrants, but their presence was restricted for decades to some regions only



## 2. Internal Migrations



- Industrialization created in Italy an exodus of Biblical proportions from the South to the North. Jehovah's Witnesses had been historically successful with migrants – including Italian migrants to Northern Europe and the Americas –, offering to them a community away from home. They targeted Southern migrants in the North, particularly in large industrial cities such as Turin, with very good results



### 3. Between Continuity and Change

- ▶ Unlike exotic new religious movements, whose success in Italy was limited to some (including Soka Gakkai) and came much later, Jehovah's Witnesses offered to former Catholics a combination of change and continuity. Change corresponded to anticlerical feelings. But there was continuity too, in the Christian imagery and moral teachings. Paradoxically, after Vatican II many Italians believed they had found among the Witnesses the old-time, moralistic religion the Catholic Church was abandoning





## 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Growth Slows Down

Year	Average Publishers	Memorial Attendance
1996	216,231	391,407
2006	233,231	427,854
2015	250,277	435,046



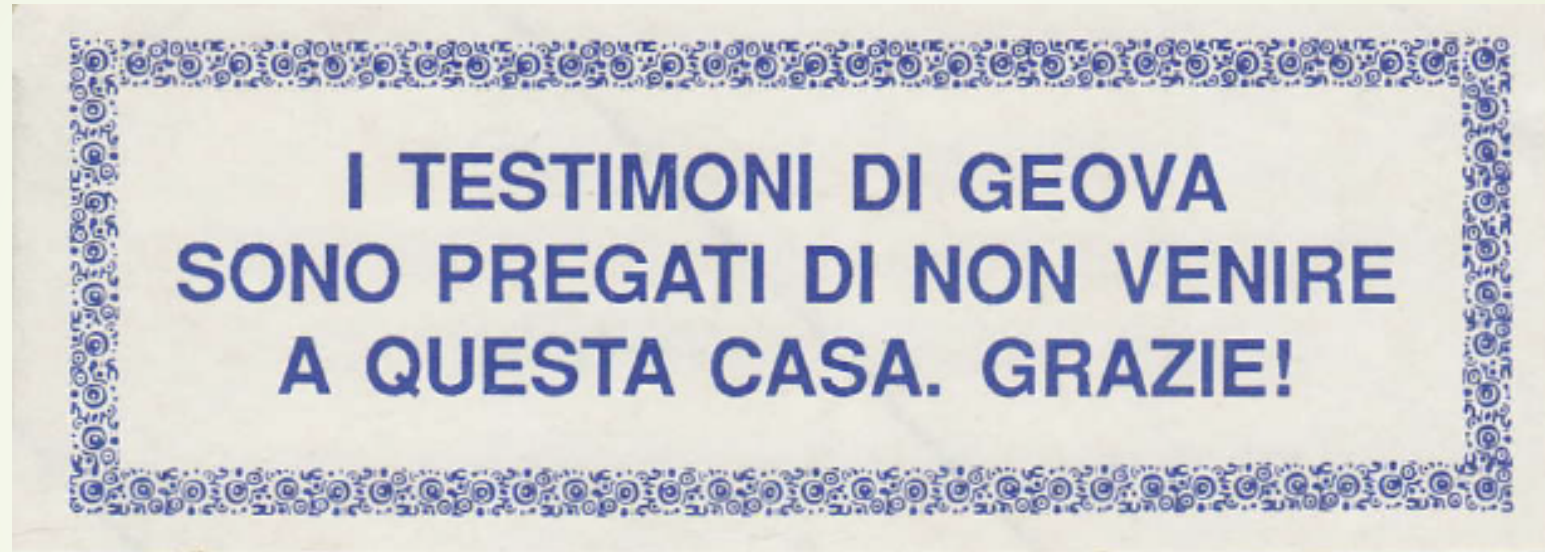
# Explanations



Building the Mormon Temple in Rome

- In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy (1) faced aggressive competition from Pentecostals, Mormons, and others; (2) could no longer count on internal migrations, as the economy slowed down and, if anything, former Southern migrants to the North went back home; and (3) were perceived as too conservatives by these younger generations who were dissatisfied with the Catholic Church

# Counter-Cult Reactions



- Italian Catholic (and mainline Protestant) counter-cultism started by targeting one group only, Jehovah's Witnesses, with hundreds of brochures produced by pioneers such as Monsignor Giovanni Marinelli (1914-2000), the father of Italian counter-cultism. Thousands of stickers inviting Witnesses not to knock at the doors were distributed by Catholic priests and others





TATIANA POLITI  
ha 40 anni, è  
divorziata e vive  
a Modena, dove  
canta nella Corale  
 lirica Rossini.  
Nell'altra pagina, in  
basso, è nella sua  
casa, accanto a una  
foto di Angelica,  
morta a soli 13 mesi  
per un tumore.

MONDADORI PORTFOLIO

### storie di donne

Tatiana ha sempre rispettato le regole imposte dalla sua religione. Ha soffocato la passione per il canto e sopportato perfino il tradimento del marito. Ma quando sua figlia si è ammалata ha capito che doveva ribellarsi a quella specie di setta che le impediva di curare la neonata. Oggi ne è uscita e aiuta gli altri a fare lo stesso  
testo di Alina Rizzi - foto di Daniele Testa

## Ero vittima dei Testimoni di Geova. Ora basta!

Da piccola non potevo festeggiare il mio compleanno né partecipare alle feste dei miei amichetti. A Natale, mi limitavo a guardare gli altri che compravano regali e organizzavano la festa più bella dell'anno e mi sentivo esclusa. Io non avevo mai addobbato un albero con le palline e le luci colorate. Non mi era permesso cantare, ballare né ascoltare la musica che volevo, perché erano attività considerate immorali. I miei amici potevano essere solo i figli di altri adepti, non contavano niente i miei sentimenti. Trasgredire significava peccare e, per i più piccoli, comportava essere sottoposti a restrizioni severe e punizioni, verbali e fisiche, eseguite anche pubblicamente. Se guardo indietro, mi vedo come una bambina dal carattere chiuso, taciturno, introverso. Sono stata una ragazza timida e spaventata dal mondo, dalle persone estranee

e perfino dalle cose più semplici. Credevo dipendesse da me, dalle mie insicurezze. Oggi invece so che sono stata vittima di regole ferree e irragionevoli, quelle del gruppo religioso cui apparteneva la mia famiglia e quindi anch'io.

### SI DEVE RENDER CONTO DI TUTTO

Mamma e papà sono stati testimoni di Geova per 40 anni. Quando io sono stata cacciata, 13 anni fa, anche loro hanno abbandonato quel credo. Tornare a una vita normale, senza regole assurde e giudizi implacabili, non è stato facile: i miei ci avevano creduto davvero a quell'ideale di fede e fratellanza, benché comportasse molti sacrifici. Tanti pensano che i Testimoni di Geova che la domenica mattina bussano alla porta delle loro case non abbiano niente di meglio da fare: non sanno che il proselitismo è obbligatorio per giovani e adulti. E non basta

## Anti-Cult Criticism

- Later, when a secular anti-cult movement emerged in Italy, it tried to capitalize on the pre-existing social hostility to Jehovah's Witnesses fueled for decades by Catholic counter-cultism. Italian anti-cultists focused on the Witnesses much more than their counterparts in other countries. They also advertised the activities of militant apostates and took advantage of some well publicized cases involving the refusal of blood transfusions for minors

# Ineffective Propaganda



- Counter-cult and anti-cult propaganda did not have a significant impact on the growth of Jehovah's Witnesses. They learned to knock at the door with the anti-Witnesses stickers, claiming they just wanted to discuss the sticker. Courts of law mostly accommodated the Witnesses, particularly on the blood issue, and some of their critics were found guilty of defamation



# Conscientious Objection

- The main legal problem for the Witnesses in Italy was removed when the law on compulsory military service – that they refused for decades, going routinely to jail – was amended offering non-military alternatives in 1998 and then abolished in 2005



Cuminetti is celebrated as Italy's «first conscientious objector»

# Legal Status



- ▶ Jehovah's Witnesses were legally recognized in Italy first as a branch of a U.S. organization in 1976, then as a domestic denomination in 1986. Their «ministers» can celebrate valid marriages in Italy (with no need of repeating the ceremony in a City Hall) and serve as jail chaplains



# Seeking a Concordat



- Opposition to the Witnesses achieved, however, one political result. Although the Witnesses do enjoy religious liberty in Italy, they would like to join the eleven Italian denominations (including the Mormons and the Buddhist Union) that entered with the Italian government into the form of concordat called by the Constitution «Intesa» (the name «Concordato» is reserved to the Catholic Church)

# Opposition to «Intesa»

- «Intese» make the churches partners of the state in various fields and taxpayers can choose to devote 0,8% of their taxes to their church. Two Italian prime ministers, Massimo D'Alema in 2000 and Romano Prodi (right) in 2007, did sign the «Intesa» with the Witnesses, but due to the oppositions the Parliament never scheduled sessions for the needed ratification





# Can They Still Grow?



- A concordat would certify that in Italy Jehovah's Witnesses are becoming part of the mainline. It would not solve, however, the problem of the slow growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the other hand, Italy, once a land of emigration, received from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century several million immigrants, and Witnesses look at them for their further growth



## Foreign-Language Congregations/Groups in Italy

Language	Congregations	Groups
Romanian	84	84
Spanish	93	63
English	44	30
Russian	19	53
Albanian	25	39
Chinese	10	43
Tagalog	19	12

+ other 36 languages other than Italian



# In Conclusion



- Ultimately, however, growth or stagnation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy will not depend on missionary work among immigrants only, but on general trends both in the Italian society and in their organization, where mainstreaming coexists with moments of retrenchment aimed at keeping their distinctive identity





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